

The Ticking Bomb

The White House staff is agonizing over this question: What if Italian prosecutors prove Soviet complicity in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II? How should President Reagan react?

Journalist Claire Sterling, who has followed the case closely, reported the other day that State Prosecutor Antonio Albano has filed a still-secret report charging that the Bulgarian secret services recruited Mehmet Ali Agca, the would-be Turkish assassin, to kill the Pope and thereby weaken the Solidarity movement in Poland.

The prosecutor, according to the report, has recommended the indictment and trial of three Bulgarians and six Turks, including Agca, for conspiracy to kill the Pope. Judge Ilario Martella, whose investigation under Italian law has covered the same ground, will rule next month on whether a trial should go forward.

Government officials say that they have no reason to doubt the accuracy of Sterling's report.

Western experts on Soviet Bloc affairs have always assumed that the Bulgarian secret police are under the direct control of the Soviet KGB. The Italian prosecutor's report does not mention the KGB, but it implies prior Soviet knowledge and approval of the assassination attempt.

As long as Bulgarian involvement depends only on the testimony of Agca, and Soviet complicity remains speculative, the Reagan Administration faces no particular problem. But what if Sergei

Ivanov Antonov, a Bulgarian airline executive whom Agca is said to have identified as one of the secret policemen directly involved in the assassination plot, were to testify that the Bulgarians got their orders from Moscow?

If persuasive evidence of this sort were offered, it is hard to see how Reagan could avoid a harsh denunciation of the Soviet Union. It is equally hard to see how the President could then meet at the summit with Soviet leader Konstantin U. Chernenko in the near future.

The White House hopes that the problem won't arise. The Administration is trying to get arms-control talks going again, and is angling for an eventual summit. About the last thing that the Reagan team needs is for the time bomb ticking away in Rome to go off.

But if it does, should the President denounce the Russians in vintage Reagan rhetoric and accept the inevitable damage to U.S.-Soviet relations? Should he blast the Bulgarians but try to let the Russians off the hook? Or should he dump the whole blame onto the late Yuri V. Andropov, who was boss of the KGB when the attempted assassination took place, and ostentatiously pretend that the new leadership had nothing to do with it?

If events in an Italian courtroom pose the question in stark and unavoidable terms, there is no easy answer to this excruciating moral and political dilemma.